

In South Africa speech deploring “exploding inequality”

Obama boasts: “I’m surprised how much money I got”

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The corporate media has overwhelmingly praised Barack Obama’s speech in Johannesburg on Tuesday at an event commemorating the 100th anniversary of the birth of Nelson Mandela, calling it an “impassioned” defense of democracy, tolerance, equality and the liberal capitalist world order established after World War II.

The reports have singled out Obama’s muted and indirect criticisms of Donald Trump’s “strongman politics” and the “utter loss of shame among political leaders” who are “caught in a lie and just double down and lie some more.”

No notice is being taken in the press reports of two points in the rambling, 90-minute address that exposes Obama’s boundless cynicism and hypocrisy. In a cliché-ridden speech that deplored the “explosion of inequality” and argued for “inclusive capitalism,” Obama evidently departed from his written text to quip, with a smile:

“Some [members of the ‘new elite’] even supported Barack Obama for the presidency of the United States, and by virtue of my status as a former head of state, some of them consider me as an honorary member of the club. (Laughter.) And I get invited to these fancy things, you know? They’ll fly me out.”

Later, in the midst of a call to rein in the “excesses of capitalism” so that “rich people are still rich” but they’re “giving a little bit back,” he evoked more laughter and applause from his audience when he said, in a jocular voice:

“I should add, by the way, right now I’m actually surprised by how much money I got, and let me tell you something: I don’t have half as much as most of these folks or a tenth or a hundredth. There’s only so much you can eat. There’s only so big a house you can have. There’s only so many nice trips you can take. I mean, it’s enough.”

At this point, the video camera panned the rostrum to show a broadly smiling and clapping Cyril Ramaphosa, the recently elected president of South Africa, who parlayed his posts at the head of the country’s trade unions into lucrative slots on corporate boards and a fortune estimated at \$675

million. More on him later.

Obama may be surprised at his recent entry into the American financial oligarchy, but it’s not for lack of effort on his part to “join the club.” Even before he left the White House in January of 2017, he and Michelle were plotting the means to cash in on their services rendered to the rich and the filthy rich during their eight years in office. That period was distinguished by two major records: the first two-term presidency to preside over uninterrupted war for the entire duration, and the greatest transfer of wealth from the bottom to the top in American history.

Since leaving office, the Obamas have garnered a \$65 million book deal, and Obama is making an estimated 50 speeches a year before corporate and Wall Street audiences at about \$400,000 a clip. It has been estimated that the couple is on course to rapidly amass a fortune of \$242 million (outdoing the Clintons, who up to now have managed to cash in to the tune of *only* \$75 million).

Meanwhile, they have been photographed frolicking on the yachts and private islands of billionaires such as Richard Branson in the company of multi-millionaire Hollywood celebrities and media moguls such as Tom Hanks and Oprah Winfrey.

This in-your-face corruption was perfectly at home amidst the fat-cat dignitaries of the African National Congress who hosted Tuesday’s event. Mandela himself remains admired and even beloved by ordinary South Africans and millions of poor and oppressed around the world. That is because of the courage and self-sacrifice he evinced when he played a leading role in the struggle against the hated apartheid regime, for which he spent 27 years in prison on Robben Island.

He is, however, honored by world imperialism and the South African bourgeoisie—white and black—because of the central role he played in channeling the mass revolt against apartheid behind the aspiring black bourgeoisie, and the guarantee he gave to the International Monetary Fund that an

ANC regime would uphold capitalist property relations and protect the interests of foreign capital.

The result of a quarter-century of “black empowerment” has been the creation of a narrow but infinitely corrupt and grasping black elite that has presided over an increase in social inequality to unprecedented levels and, if anything, a worsening of poverty. In paying tribute to Mandela and hailing his successor Ramaphosa, Obama discreetly omitted mention of the fact that South Africa is officially the most unequal country on the face of the earth, with more than half of its population living below the poverty line, an official jobless rate of 27 percent, and a youth unemployment rate of 50 percent.

In his speech, following a potted history of democratic progress in the 20th century which failed to mention the single event most responsible for whatever social and political gains were achieved internationally—the socialist revolution of October 1917 in Russia—Obama deplored the “explosion of inequality” over recent decades and criticized the indifference of the “new elite” to the consequences of their policies for working people.

He could, of course, have pointed to Ramaphosa, sitting a few feet away. In 2012, as a 9 percent shareholder in the Lonmin mine in Marikana, the current South African president and former head of the National Union of Mineworkers of South Africa had demanded that the authorities take action against the “plainly dastardly criminal acts” of striking miners. The call was carried out when security forces gunned down the strikers, in the worst massacre since the mass murder carried out by the apartheid regime at Sharpeville and Soweto. Thirty-four miners were killed and 78 were wounded.

Or, Obama could have looked in the mirror. Typical of Obama’s speeches, Tuesday’s address criticized reactionary and anti-democratic policies as though Obama himself had no part in their implementation.

Thus, Obama denounced the rapid growth of inequality, while gliding over his own multi-trillion-dollar bailout of Wall Street and “quantitative easing” policies, which were designed to pump up the stock market and further enrich the oligarchy. Nor did he note the wage-cutting impact of his auto bailout, which imposed a 50 percent across-the-board cut in pay for new-hires; his support for the Detroit bankruptcy, which launched a nationwide attack on public-employee pension benefits; or his health care “reform,” which has increased out-of-pocket cost and reduced services for millions of workers.

He attacked escalating press censorship in one breath, and in the next supplied the pretext for Internet censorship:

“The free press is under attack. Censorship and state control of media is on the rise. Social media—once seen as a

mechanism to promote knowledge and understanding and solidarity—has proved to be just as effective promoting hatred and paranoia and propaganda and conspiracy theories.”

But it is a fact that his administration prosecuted more reporters for leaking classified information than any previous administration, and he spearheaded the persecution of Edward Snowden, Chelsea Manning and Julian Assange.

Obama’s supposed commitment to democracy and the rule of law is belied by his own record of defending the perpetrators of torture, maintaining the Guantanamo prison camp, overseeing abductions and detention without due process, defending mass domestic surveillance and expanding drone assassinations, including against US citizens.

In his speech, he criticized the war against immigrants, making no acknowledgment of his own role in preparing it, including the deportation of more immigrants—2.7 million—than all previous administrations combined.

The central contention of his speech was advanced in the following sentence: “On Madiba’s 100th birthday, we now stand at a crossroads—a moment in time in which two very different visions of humanity’s future compete for the hearts and the minds of citizens around the world.”

This sentence contains two huge lies. The second is the claim that “citizens around the world” will have any say in the policies pursued by the various capitalist governments. The first is the claim that Obama’s empty and demagogic call for a “kinder and gentler” capitalism represents a fundamentally opposed and viable alternative to the far-right policies of Trump and similar right-wing populist regimes and parties around the world.

The reality is that Trump’s policies of war, social counterrevolution and authoritarianism are an extension, in a somewhat more extreme form, of the policies of the Obama administration. On these issues, the entire ruling elite and all of its parties are united, whatever the specific foreign policy questions over which they are presently brawling.



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